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## LEUVEN THEOLOGIANS AND THE 'EPISCOPAL TURN' IN THE 16TH CENTURY

May 12th, 1559, Rome. Utrecht canon and former Leuven theology professor Franciscus Sonnius, deputy of king Philip II of Spain, had been summoned to the papal palace. There, a momentous *consistorium* would take place. Finally, after a nerve-wracking year of lobbying at the Holy See, Sonnius had achieved his goal: the proclamation of a bull which allowed remodeling of the dioceses in the Low Countries. It had required some ten years of labour, pulling the right strings and pushing forward innovative and indeed revolutionary ideas, all the while keeping them secret, so as not to stir any resistance against the revolutionary plans. Now, it was all successfully drawn to a close as pope Paul IV was about to proclaim the ground-breaking bull. Sonnius was asked to assist him with reading the exotic names of villages and other places, which were real tonguebreakers for the Italian prelate on the chair of Saint Peter.

For Sonnius May 12th, 1559, must have been a historic day, perfumed with the air of personal victory. Even more, it was a truly historic day for all the Low Countries, though for opponents and supporters alike it may have taken several months and even years to realize this. In any case, one can argue that the proclamation of *Super Universas* (as the bull is known after its opening words) was more important for the history of the Low Countries – particularly the southern provinces – than the publication of Luther's 95 theses.

This revolutionary bull is considered a hallmark of a fundamental evolution which came about in the sixteenth century Catholic Church, in the Low Countries and beyond. The refashioning of catholicism was determined through many operations, one of which was the reinvigoration of episcopal authority including the restoration of the bishop as the principal pastor of his flock and as the leader of the diocesan clergy. For this evolution I would like to coin the term 'episcopal turn', for in the Low Countries this development really constituted a fundamental shift in both the religious and the political domain.

The episcopal turn and *Super Universas* were only possible through the emergence of a modern clerical mindset, creating an intellectual climate in which pastoral care was put back in the center. This evolution was closely intertwined with a general upsurge of ideas on religious renewal and an intensification of church reform. The notion of reform has always been present in the Church, but it gained extra attention as a result of the Protestant Reformation. In the Low Countries, the faculty of theology in Leuven grew into a front-runner of church renewal, long before the council fathers of Trent issued their final decrees in 1563. The resounding success of different kinds of church criticism – from Luther *cum suis*, but even more from Erasmus and his enthusiasts – had confronted theologians in Leuven with striking reproaches. Even if the situation on the field was not as miserable as critics made

it appear, Leuven theologians also noticed and acknowledged that the Church suffered from structural problems and abuses. Theologians working as inquisitors experienced in their examinations that a lack of pastoral direction and control by competent priests gave way to heterodoxies. Not only was this due to insufficient training, but definitely also to the deficient supervision of the clergy and the very organization of the institutional church. The vastness of the dioceses in the Low Countries hampered efficient government and control. Its bishops, mostly residing across the territorial borders of the Low Countries, were often occupied with political interests and did not prioritize pastoral care (although it must be stressed that it was not completely absent!). Moreover, episcopal power had critically eroded in the High Middle Ages, and bishops struggled with wayward, powerful archpriests, archdeacons and chapters. Thus, from a reflection on the state of affairs in the Church bit by bit an awareness grew that ecclesiastical structures in the Low Countries too needed reform and reorganization. Such observations prompted the Leuven theologians Ruard Tapper and Franciscus Sonnius to draft a scheme for the reorganization of the bishoprics, in which the erection of new dioceses was proposed as a means to increase efficiency and success in pastoral guidance. It is important to notice that this scheme not merely proposed a reorganization of the structures proper. Its purpose was also to substantiate the reinvigoration of episcopal authority. Leuven theologians strongly favoured the episcopal model for in their eyes this was the ideal way to stimulate pastoral solicitude and reinstall control of the clergy, so as to root out heresies.

The scheme was discussed in great secret with a select group of high government officials, in order to prepare the project for further negotiation with the Holy See. In March 1558, this mission was eventually assigned to Sonnius, and he carried it out with success. Even so, it was a pyrrhic victory. The execution of the bull in the 1560s – in the final stages with the firm support of the duke of Alba – contributed to the rise of political and religious tensions in the Low Countries, which would ultimately devolve into civil war. In the course of the conflict, all dioceses in the Northern provinces ultimately became vacant, a severe blow to the catholic Church in the Low Countries. However, in the long run *Super Universas* constituted in the Southern dioceses a fit framework in which catholic renewal was effectuated, as the oeuvre of Michel Cloet and many of his students has abundantly demonstrated. After 1559, the government's recruitment strategy fundamentally changed to a preference for university-trained clerics over nobility. Indeed, most bishops of the new dioceses were alumni of Leuven university (mostly the faculty of theology). All had been imbued with a Tridentine pastoral attitude. Many of their close collaborators were of the same spirit. With strong support of the central government, episcopal authority would indeed be restored to the bishops, although that was a painstaking process which took several decades. A long train of Leuven theologians vigourously contributed to the reinvigoration of episcopal authority, not only as bishops, but also as diocesan collaborators or as local pastors. The reorganization of the bishoprics thus facilitated and enhanced the shift towards a pastorally inspired clerical culture.

The episcopal turn and the shift towards a pastoral mindset amongst the clergy, also contributed to the emergence of a practical theology, which was developed at the Leuven faculty. Johannes Molanus' *Theologiae practicae compendium* (1585), a practical manual for the students of the King's College, was one of the first comprehensive handbooks surveying pastoral issues and practices, so as to prepare the students for their tasks.

The episcopal turn had consequences in other domains of religious life as well, which has so far gone unnoticed in the historiography on early modern catholicism in the Low Countries. Both the inquisitorial and the censorial apparatus in operation during the first half of the sixteenth century, as established by Charles V in the wake of Luther's opposition to the Roman Church, would (gradually) be brought back under episcopal supervision. Thus, we can explain why Leuven theologians lost their enthusiasm for the inquisitorial office and promoted a return to the *status quo ante*, i.e. inquisition (heresy prosecution) as a fundamental part of episcopal responsibility. There is no substantial research on censorship in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Low Countries, but books of the second half of the century are more likely to be censored by a diocesan official, which was not the case previous to 1559. This hypothesis should be further corroborated by quantitative research. It is clear, however, that the episcopal turn had a major impact on all ways of ecclesiastical life in the early modern era. Leuven theologians energetically whole-heartedly promoted and supported it.